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REFEREED PAPER

## Bishnuprasad Rabha as Cultural Icon of Assam: The Process of Meaning Making

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### ABSTRACT

The term 'cultural icon' is generally used to refer to individuals or images, objects, visual sign, monuments, space and so on. In semiotics the term 'icon' is used to refer to a sign that bears close resemblance to the object that it stands for. Icons are particularly influential signifiers because they are immediately identifiable and carry complex cultural codes in a compact image. In this paper the understanding of 'cultural icon' is not limited to semiotics. Following Keyan Tomaselli and David Scott in *Cultural Icons* (2009), we believe that cultural icons are purposive constructions. An attempt has been made in this paper to analyze the association of 'desirable' meanings to a cultural icon (while dropping 'undesirable' ones); thus, it is imperative that we look at the changing socio-political contexts behind such purposive constructions. With this in mind, we look at the iconic figure of Bishnuprasad Rabha who has been one of the most revered figures in the cultural history of Assam and has been appropriated as a cultural icon in different discourses of the national life of Assam that have emerged in recent times.

### Keywords

Cultural icon; *kalaguru*; Assam agitation; nationalist; meaning making

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### What is Cultural Icon?

The term ‘cultural icon’ is often used to refer to images, objects, visual signs, monuments, spaces etc. with cultural significance. The semiotic term ‘icon’ introduced by Peirce refers to a sign that resembles its object. The capability of carrying complex cultural codes in a compact image makes an icon an influential signifier which is immediately identifiable. According to the *Oxford Living Dictionaries* icon means ‘a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration.’ Therefore icons can either be persons or impersonal things. Impersonal icons include both tangible and intangible aspects of our society, e.g. places, buildings, brands, foods, social practices, institutions, or historical events. On the other hand, iconic personhood combines ‘abstract inscriptions of collective identity with concrete examples of living practice – with ethical, moral, political, and aesthetic case studies of how to live “the good life” in American terms’ (Leypoldt 2010, p.7). But in an Indian context it would be more relevant to talk about the more immediate realities of life. The lives and activities of icons become exemplary and normative models that influence public life. The normative power of iconic individuals of the past or present, their seeming ‘achievability’, distinguishes them from fictional or mythical figures, but the ideal power of iconic persons is not always real. Sometimes many narratives are constructed only to authenticate and legitimize the ideal power of the iconic persons.

An icon works as a telling document of a specific period of history. Ruma Chakravarti discusses icons associated with religion. ‘Icons associated with temples may also be a sign of the wealth or social standing of the person who finances the temple building process’ (2012, p.18). This association is also found in many other aspects of a culture apart from religion. The significance of an icon and the reinforcement of cultural meaning attached to it may support the social position of the users. Here we can refer to the term ‘cultural icon’. Cultural icons are extraordinary because of their embodiment of important and significant values. We can consider some individuals as cultural icons because an individual can also be a towering personality and also have immense cultural significance.

Mike Parker comments, ‘Cultural icons can take many forms such as, objects, fictional characters, cartoons, and buildings. But in terms of narrative impact real people, given extraordinary conditions, are the ones most likely to attain primary iconic status’ (2012, p.23). The issue of ‘cultural icon’ has been discussed by Keyan Tomaselli and David Scott in *Cultural Icons* (2009). Cultural icons are constructed based on a particular purpose. Tomaselli and Scott argue that ‘semiotics is not just about the “meaning of any image or corpus of images” but about the way images are constructed and work within systems; it is also about the way they are interpreted’ (2009, p. 14). This indicates that the meanings of any image (or the activities of person) are always interpreted from different angles. It is a process of meaning making. In *The Iconography of Nationalism: Icons, Popular Culture, and American Nationalism* Dallas Hulsey (2005) develops a model of cultural icons, defining icons as highly visible, culturally variable, and over determined auratic images. For him cultural icons can shape and direct human desire. Cultural icons are strengthened by their connection to the sacred and the political. All these can be either positive or negative and can even be both. Ruma Chakravarti states, ‘Often icons carry more than one meaning. These are

each accurate in their own way as they usually address a number of separate mythological or historical concepts' (2012, p.18). The meaning of cultural icons is interpreted or constructed according to the suitable context. These meanings are also related to contemporary demand.

Having said this, there is a need to look beyond the available scholarship on icons to understand the problematic nature of iconization in the context of the North East of India, a hotbed of identity politics. There is a need here to understand the intricate connections between ethnicity, the politics of indigeneity and iconization. The iconic figure of Bishnu Rabha is shaped both by ethnic stereotypes as well as by 'universal' ideals of heroism. He is simultaneously projected as a 'tribal' and as an enlightened leader of the masses, glossing over the contradictions that arise from these two images.

Here, the social contexts of course incorporate different purposes of different people. Processes of meaning-making characterize the social life of politically sensitive zones in which battles for establishing the validity of community identities are constantly fought. Bishnuprasad Rabha is a revered figure in the cultural history of Assam. He has been appropriated as a cultural icon in different discourses of the national life of Assam that have emerged in recent years. He has been assigned distinct positions by critics, readers, the ruling parties and different formal and informal institutions of Assam. They have tried to establish their understanding of this legendary figure based on his texts. And these texts of course have a life far beyond their immediate material borders. Here Bishnuprasad Rabha has been read by them in line with their own specific beliefs. In their accounts, this cultural icon is shown as an inspiring personality who stood for the nationalist hopes and aspirations of an entire community.

### **Bishnuprasad Rabha: The legend**

European literature was a major influence in the formation of modern Assamese literature in the early part of the twentieth century. To a large extent, this influence entered filtered through the Bengal renaissance and other such developments in the neighboring state. In spite of the critical socio-political situation of Assam during this time of colonial rule, it was European literature that helped to bring about changes in the nationalist consciousness along with the growth of a rich intellectual tradition in the state. The groundwork for a distinctive tradition of Assamese literature had already been shaped in the nineteenth century by such stalwarts as Chandrakumar Agrawala (1867-1938), Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1868-1938) and Hemchandra Goswami (1872-1928). This had paved the way for progressive minded writers and cultural activists like Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rabha. Their intervention added new meaning and flavor to the existing tradition of Assamese literature. Having said this, as we shall shortly see, the times of Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rabha were times of great political upheavals and social instability.

Bishnuprasad Rabha was one of the most dominant figures to contribute to the literary, cultural and political field of Assam. His extraordinary versatility helped to endear him to the people of Assam. He was an artist, singer, lyricist, music composer, actor, litterateur and architect. He actively participated in the political field, being motivated by the political ideology of Marxism. He was born in 1909 in Dhaka. Bishnu Rabha's father Raibahadur

Gopal Chandra Rabha was in the British Police and the family was financially sound. But, Raibahadur Gopal Chandra Rabha passed away when Bishnu Rabha was still in his childhood. By then, thanks to the motivation of his parents, he had already developed a great passion for acquiring the rich cultural heritage of Assam. His rich repertoire of experience and encyclopedic knowledge of the different folk traditions of the North East of India helped to develop and shape his musical sense. Bishnuprasad Rabha was also greatly influenced by the legendary figures of Bengal during those times – Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay.

Bishnu Rabha's public life was started through his participation in the anti-colonial student movement. In 1929 he became the general secretary of the students' union of Ripon College. This was the turning point of his political life. During this period he came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and actively participated in the Independence movement of 1930 (the civil disobedience movement) in Calcutta. For this he had to leave Ripon College and he joined the Victoria College of Coochbehar. But he was again expelled from the college for having annoyed the British. Bishnu Rabha fled to Tezpur and started his activities from there.

In the latter part of 1940 Bishnuprasad Rabha went to Kashi for deliberating on the Kamrupi dance form and also to undertake research on classical music. At that time, Satish Kalekar was the president of the Dramatic Association. Satish Kalekar and Ramoni Sarmah organized 'Rabha Divas' at Kashi University. Bishnuprasad Rabha performed a dance based on *Krishna Leela*, *Dasavatar* and *Tandava* in the celebration. In the closing ceremony of the 'Rabha Divas' Bishnuprasad Rabha was specially praised by the Vice-Chancellor of Kashi University, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (Datta 2011, p. 5)<sup>1</sup>.

During his student life, Bishnuprasad Rabha followed the ideology of non-violence of Gandhi and the Congress. He played an active part in the activities of the Congress related to the freedom movement of India. The proletariats of different parts of India also took part in the non-cooperation movement. But the educated leaders of the movement hardly cared about the expectations of the farmers, workers etc. of our society. The educated used the power of the masses to make the British rulers aware of their strength and compelled them to come for a discussion. In the discussion the problems and needs of the proletariats did not get much attention. On the other hand, proletariat's hostility was discouraged by the leaders. The non-cooperation movement was stopped by Mahatma Gandhi when the farmers assaulted the police. These farmers were punished by the British. But Mahatma Gandhi did nothing for releasing the farmers (Gohain 2014, p. 674). In such circumstances Bishnuprasad Rabha lost his faith in Gandhian ideology and Congress. He was gradually drawn towards communist ideology and in 1946 he formally accepted the membership of the Revolutionary Communist

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<sup>1</sup>It is commonly believed that Bishnuprasad Rabha was entitled *Kalaguru* by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan after the celebration of 'Rabha Divas' at Kashi University. But a new interpretation has been presented by Hemanta Barua, the president of Tezpur Sahitya Sabha in the celebration of 'Rabha Divas' at Bishnu Rabha's native place Tezpur, suggesting that the title *Kalaguru* was bestowed on Rabha by senior journalist Bibhut Kalita. He said many books had wrongly mentioned that the title was given by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan at Varanasi, following a recital of the Tandava dance there. It is highlighted by 'The Telegraph' on 21 June, 2016.

Party of India (RCPI). He started to write various songs and poems in support of communism. From 1940 to 1950 he wrote many revolutionary songs and at the same time he also wrote many songs and poems reflecting nationalism and liberal humanism.

Bishnuprasad Rabha's communist ideology was also reflected in his stories, plays and novel. 'Hiyar Pung', 'Sonpahi', 'Sapon Kuwali', 'Kuri Bachar Jail', 'Mamir Har', 'Banua Panchyat', 'Krishak' are creations of Bishnu Rabha that are steeped in his communist ideology. Bishnuprasad Rabha analyzed his contemporary society. He realized the exploitation and oppression of the poor people by the powerful section of our society. He became clear about the upcoming consequences of Independence of India. These ideas are very clearly expressed in many of his plays. *Sapon Kuwali* is one of the plays of Bishnuprasad Rabha devoted to the freedom movement of India. The story of this play is set in an urban environment and it is centered on an aristocratic family. The head of the family dies as a result of torture by the police as he participates in the procession of Quit India Movement. His wife and children are inspired by his ideology. The conversation between Sewali, the daughter of the martyr and Seri, a childhood friend of Sewali, gives the idea of the real nature of the upcoming freedom of India. Both the characters are socially conscious and enlightened through education. Seri raises the idea of the democratic nation where the powerful are in the position of ruling class. She therefore has doubts about the freedom of India. India will definitely get freedom; however, in the name of democracy, the current ruling class may lose their status and society may become a system where everything will be decided by the bourgeoisie.

Bishnuprasad Rabha was a popular personality in the social life of Assam. His popularity was propagated mainly by the common people rather than by any newspaper, radio, television, cinema or staged play (Raychoudhury 2007, p. 30). Being a Marxist Bishnuprasad Rabha aspired to a classless society. Therefore, he clearly stated that capitalist administration could never bring development and the uplifting of the working classes. From 1945 onwards Bishnu Rabha participated in a variety of public gatherings in order to convey his gratitude toward the public for their massive support. Being associated with the communist party and with the hope of understanding Marxist philosophy and Marxist economics he had been trying to inspire people with Marxist ideology. He went to different parts of Assam to awaken the people of those areas toward the pathetic condition of Assam. Being a communist and aspiring to 'real freedom' he lived a homeless life. In this phase of his life Bishnuprasad Rabha was admired by all people irrespective of communities. They enthusiastically waited to see and hear him.

The linguistic diversity of Assam was realized by Bishnuprasad Rabha. He acquired the knowledge of almost all languages and dialects of Assam. Today, people from the entire length of the state want to claim Bishnuprasad Rabha as their own. Anil Raychoudhury has commented that he never saw a person as popular as Bishnu Rabha in his life (2007, p.30). Bishnu Rabha was so closely associated with the farmers of Assam that he practically experienced the pathetic condition of the farmers. He calculated the economic earnings of the farmers and observed how they were exploited by the feudal lords. Anil Raychoudhury was once a leader of the Farmers' Association. It is generally expected that this kind of

calculation should be done by the leaders of Farmers' Association. But Anil Raychoudhury admitted that being a leader of Farmers' Association he was even not aware in that way of the economic earnings of the farmers. In contrast, the profound interest of Bishnuprasad Rabha in the farmers brought him close to the common masses. Bishnuprasad Rabha's popularity can also be justified by his participation in the cultural summit of Asom Sahitya Sabha held in Mirza, because it was the demand of the local farmers of Mirza to invite Bishnuprasad Rabha to the meeting (Sarma 2007, p.18).

Bishnuprasad Rabha's personal experiences about Assamese society helped him in literary creations. He was quite dis-satisfied with the socio-economic and political condition of Assam. Most of his literary creations clearly expressed the failure of existing political and economic systems to give certainty to the poor class. He felt the need of change and therefore both as a student and a mature citizen he took part in politics to change the social system. For this aspiration he changed parties, ways and even left his home. In his lyrical play *Mukti Deul* Bishnuprasad Rabha stated that the handing over of power to the common people could make democracy fruitful and lead to the establishment of *Panchayati raj*<sup>2</sup>. He believed that this was the way to move toward socialism (Kalita 2007, 43). During his exile<sup>3</sup>, Bishnuprasad Rabha spread the ideology of socialism among the working class people, farmers and the ethnic communities for which many of them chose the path of revolution. But the government suppressed that revolution with an iron hand and the leaders were imprisoned. On the other hand, many leaders and members quit the armed revolution considering it to be a 'false' one and joined the socialist groups of India. At the same time many educated ethnic people, that is, those who belong to the different tribal communities of Assam, and others changed their political beliefs and became opportunists. The newly emerged ethnic intellectuals asserted their ethnicity aggressively. As a result of this, the core ideals of equality and brotherhood were lost. In the general election of 1957, Bishnuprasad Rabha and Bhabananda Dutta jointly contested on behalf of the socialist party from the Kokrajhar Parliamentary Constituency and they were defeated by the Congress contestants Dharanidhar Basumotary and Rani Manjula Devi. But Bishnuprasad Rabha was elected from Tezpur Legislative Constituency in 1967 (Sarma 2007, p.19). Tezpur was his native place where he nurtured his devotion to art and culture. He was familiar with each and every part of Tezpur. But his defeat in the 1957 general election shows that Bishnuprasad Rabha's ideology of socialism as well as equality was yet to find wide acceptance among the people of Assam.

### **Narratives on Bishnuprasad Rabha**

As is the case with any icon, there are different stories regarding Bishnuprasad Rabha, some of which may not have any factual basis at all. These narratives are based on collective memories which have great importance in the making of a cultural icon. 'Collective memory is not only what people really remember through their own experience, it also incorporates the constructed past which is constitutive of the collectivity' (Mitzal 2003, p. 26). These

<sup>2</sup> Panchayati raj is a socialistic term. It is one of the forms of local-self government in rural areas of India. It is a decentralised form of government where each village would be responsible for its own affairs.

<sup>3</sup> Bishnuprasad Rabha disguised himself from 1948 to 1952. He coined this phase of life as 'exile' in his essay 'Agyatobashar Katha'

narratives can be termed myths emerging out of specific social contexts and interactions. Tilak Das, one of the comrades of Bishnuprasad Rabha, wrote two biographies on Bishnu Rabha. The first one is *Bishnu Rabha Atia Kiman Rati*(1977) and the other one is *Kalaguru Bishnu Rabha*(1988). In *Kalaguru Bishnu Rabha*, Das refers to some of these popular stories about Rabha.

Many of these stories have to do with Bishnuprasad Rabha's period of exile. Very often he had to disguise himself during the time of his revolutionary activities. One of the incidents concerns Girish Bayan, an artist of Barpeta. His family had a good relation with Bishnuprasad Rabha, because Rabha was inspired toward the ideology of Sankaradeva by Haromohan Bayan, the father of Girish Bayan. Girish Bayan met Bishnu Rabha at Kamakshya, then dressed as an old Bengali widow. He could identify Bishnu Rabha and talked to him. Girish Bayan requested him to stay there by promising not to reveal the truth to others. But Bishnuprasad Rabha left that place.

Bishnuprasad Rabha was a brave man. His bravery is often justified by many narratives. Though born and brought up in a rich family, he spent his life for and amidst the poor section of society. It happened that 'May Day' was observed at Bhakotpara of Darrang district in 1949. The meeting was presided over by Aurobindo Gosh, the revolutionary communist leader. Bishnu Rabha delivered the inaugural speech in the meeting. The police fired on the public. Katiram Bodo died in that incident. Bishnu Rabha changed his clothes and wore a head dress made out of his torn clothes. Carrying the dead body in his arms he silently left the place. The police started to search for Bishnu Rabha among the public but no one could identify him because of his disguise.

Bishnu Rabha, along with 13 of his comrades, once traveled to Burhi Khowang in order to attend a state level summit of the Revolutionary Communist Party. In Jorhat district, there was strict patrolling of the military to check the activities of the communist revolutionaries. Bishnuprasad Rabha was in a military dress and while passing through the security check-gate the military-men saluted him, thinking him to be a military officer. On the way their car broke down and they had to walk bare-foot from the Teok area of Jorhat district. They pretended to be members of a groom's marriage party and so the police did not catch them. It is expected that a cultural icon would have qualities of bravery, courage apart from love and compassion. All these stories justify Bishnuprasad Rabha as a courageous and heroic personality and at the same time cement his position as an iconic figure in social life of Assam.

Mahapurush Sankaradeva is one of the most important personalities in the socio-cultural and national life of Assam. His ideology and philosophy were popularized by Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Bishnuprasad Rabha beyond the boundaries of religion. It is said that Bishnuprasad Rabha was very popular amongst the *Bhakats*(devotee) of Barpeta sattra because of his deep knowledge of Sankaradeva and Madhabadeva. There are narratives to suggest that Bishnuprasad Rabha took part in the morning nam-prasanga<sup>4</sup> of Barpeta sattra

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<sup>4</sup> Nam-prasanga is the religious prayer prevalent in Vaishnavite tradition. On this nam-prasanga devotees take parts and sit in front of the Guru Asana (a symbolic replica of deity) and sing prayers. Barpeta Sattra is a

wearing *Seleng* and *Gamocha*.<sup>5</sup> Nam-prasanga with this traditional attire is a day to day activity for the *Bhakats* of Assam. But highlighting of Bishnuprasad Rabha's participation in nam-prasanga enhances the significance of both Sankaradeva and Bishnuprasad Rabha in the social life of Assam, because Bishnu Rabha was a revolutionary. In spite of this, he was respectful to the religious aspects of social life.

Many communities from different regions of Assam expressed their respective narratives about their close relationship with Bishnuprasad Rabha. Rabha dreamt of a multicultural Assam. He went to different parts of the state. He left behind strong memories in every place that he visited. There is a Bael (Bengal quince) tree at the Borbil village of Karbi Anglong district. The elderly villagers claim that Bishnu Rabha often took rest beneath this tree while living in exile in the Borbil village before the independence movement of 1947. Since then the villagers remember that tree and they show their respect to it. Presently, there is a demand for consideration of the place as a heritage site and at the same time there is a demand for some initiatives to be taken by the government of Assam to preserve such kinds of memorials associated with Bishnuprasad Rabha, because the material evidence of historicity helps to promote iconicity. This concern has been reported in the Assamese newspaper, *Amar Asom*, for example on 20 June 2016.

### The context

Because of his contributions in different fields of Assam's everyday life and culture, Bishnuprasad Rabha is a respected figure in the cultural history of Assam. Thus, he is also appropriated within the framework of different discourses of nationalism. Nationalism is a powerful political ideology that involves a strong identification of a group of people with the sense of belongingness to a nation. In the case of Assam, nationalism emerged under the British rule. In the post-independent era, Assam has witnessed the emergence of sub-nationalism. Interestingly, both the forces of nationalism and sub-nationalism have claimed association with the philosophy of Bishnuprasad Rabha. The nation is sometimes evoked by activists to make political claims on behalf of a community. Political and social activists try to establish an association between their ideology and that of the contributions or ideas of Bishnuprasad Rabha so that they can convince the common masses about the relevance and justification of their demand.

Let us consider the political spectrum of Assam over the last few decades. Two of the most prominent political actors in post-independent Assam have been the Asom Sahitya Sabha (the Assam Literary Society) and All Assam Students Union (AASU). These two organizations have been influential players in the socio-cultural and political life of Assam. The Asom Sahitya Sabha has sought to promote the Assamese language, culture and

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Vaishnavite Institute of Assam established by Madhabadeva in 15th century. The nam-prasanga is the daily prayer in Barpeta Sattrā since the time of its formation. It is divided to morning, afternoon and night prayers in Barpeta Sattrā. The morning nam-prasanga consists of puwar geet (morning song), puwar vatima (morning hymns), nam-kirttan (praise and prayer), reading of some shloka (verse) of the Bhagabata and path (recitation).

<sup>5</sup>*Seleng* is piece of cloth used in Assamese society generally at the time of ritual or any religious functions. *Gamocha* is a hand woven cloth of Assam worn around the neck. It is also used in religious and ceremonial functions.



literature and the AASU is a voluntary federation of the students union of schools and colleges and was at the forefront of the Assam Movement (1979-85). Both of these organizations have tried to interpret and appropriate the ideology of Bishnuprasad Rabha to further their respective interests. Use of this cultural icon of Assam is evident particularly in the nationalistic discourse of such organizations.

### **The fall and rise of reputation**

The grand celebration of 'Bishnu Rabha Divas' (Memorial Day) every year has become a marked feature of Assam's cultural life. However, some are critical of this ritualistic celebration of the icon's anniversary for they are apprehensive that it will gradually distance the masses from the real ideology of Bishnu Rabha. Critics like Hiren Gohain are apprehensive that the people, who are praising Bishnu Rabha, may actually be straying far away from what Bishnuprasad Rabha actually stood for (2009, p.394).

The labeling of Bishnuprasad Rabha as *Kalaguru* (the master of the arts) is interesting. This is designed to prevent the new generation from being motivated by the ideology of Bishnuprasad Rabha (Barkola 2016, p.5). Therefore in the celebration of 'Bishnu Rabha Divas' the agenda generally consists of songs, poems and a few talks on Bishnu Rabha where any reference to the revolutionary aspects of his life and creation are avoided. These are all designed in such a way that they can represent Bishnuprasad Rabha only as the master of the arts.

Bishnu Rabha was nothing short of a legend, a demigod for the common masses of his time. Once when Bishnu Rabha was in exile, he met Pradip Chaliha. Chaliha apparently requested Bishnu Rabha to return to the field of art and literature. But Bishnu Rabha stood firm on his ground of revolution. He believed that the purpose behind wielding a sten-gun was not in contradiction to the purpose of his contribution to the fields of art and literature (Gohain 2009, p.394). Because of this dedicated aim, there were huge gatherings of common masses when Bishnu Rabha was caught by the police. This was evidence of his popularity and it also established the fact that the image of Bishnu Rabha as a true revolutionary in the minds of the common masses was still alive. The death anniversary of this neglected talented man is being observed today with great pomp and enthusiasm. It is interesting to note that there has been an apparent change in the attitude of the government towards Bishnu Rabha since the time of the Assam agitation. No doubt it was the demand of the people to which the government had to succumb.

This is at odds with the government's attitude towards him at the time of the Sino-Indian war of 1962, when he was suspected of being a turncoat of communist-China. In the foreword of *1962: Sino-Indian Conflict* by Mrinal Talukdar, Brigadier Ranjit Barthaakur states, 'It shattered India's aspiration of emerging as a great Asian-power, and also put paid to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's dream of establishing himself as a world leader' (2014, p. i). There are different causes of the Sino-Indian war. Among them an uncertain Himalayan border is one of the major causes. But Mrinal Talukdar, one of the senior journalists of North-East of India is of the view that it was Jawaharlal Nehru's Forward policy, which was the chief reason for the instigation of war by China.

Assam was a notable place during the Sino-Indian war. At that time Arunachal Pradesh was constitutionally a part of Assam. Tawang and Bomdila, belonging to present day Arunachal Pradesh, were occupied by the Chinese in 1962. After that the Chinese marched towards Tezpur, an important town of Assam. The possibility of Assam being taken over by the Chinese seemed very real at that moment. Fortunately, however, the declaration of ceasefire happened to allay such fears; at this point in time, the Chinese were within 50kms of Tezpur.

Most of Indians believed that communist China would not invade India for imperial purposes. But this notion was altered by the invasion of China (Das 1988, p.103). During those days, many communists were ill-treated because it was suspected that they had instigated communist China to attack India as well as Assam. Bishnuprasad Rabha was accused of being a turncoat by the 1962s government of Assam (Barkola 2016, p.5). Being a communist he could foresee the continuing hegemony over the working class people of independent India by the newly emerging middle classes who would act like feudal lords and *mouzadars*.<sup>6</sup> He felt that unless structural changes were initiated by the government, the independence of India would be illusory. Consequently, his assertion was taken for disloyalty and not as he intended, as a call for revolution to establish equality. Therefore, during the time of the Chinese aggression, like many other communists of the times, he earned the ire of the then Congress government which claimed that he was a spy of the enemy country. Therefore, on 19 November 1962 he was arrested by the Congress government and imprisoned in Odisha. Some intellectuals criticized him at that time. It was then a policy of the government servants to achieve good will from the government by creating a distasteful and repulsive image of Bishnuprasad Rabha (Barkola 2016, p.5).

The fact is that they were unable to realize that being a Marxist-Leninist also implied the ethos of nationalist consciousness. The turning point in the change of government policy was marked from the time of the Assam agitation (1979-85). Since then, there has been a marked tendency to establish Bishnu Rabha as an extreme nationalist artist, literary writer and *Kalaguru*. The celebration of 'Rabha Divas' with pomp started especially from the time of the Assam movement in 1979. The leaders of the Assam movement were quite aware of the popularity of Bishnu Rabha among the common masses. Therefore, they appropriated this iconic figure in order to promote and fulfil their agenda.

The demanding mass movement, the Assam agitation, was the outcome of dissidence by civil society against undocumented immigrants in Assam. The movement was led by AASU and the 'All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad' (AAGSP). A great number of people from Assam responded to it and actively participated in the movement to identify and expel illegal immigrants. The native Assamese people, who started the movement, were supported throughout the Brahmaputra valley by tribes like the Bodos, Tiwas, Misings, and Rabhas.

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<sup>6</sup>*Mauzadar* is an administrative official responsible for a *Mauza* in British Assam. The influential and affluent resident was appointed as *Mauzadar* to collect demanded land revenue from the masses of respective *Mauza* and deposit to the British authority on date.

In Assam, the presence of migrant groups coming from the time of the British rule (from 1826 onwards) had caused tension for the native people. The large number of immigrants had upset Assam's once-existing demographic and economic balance, and threatened the Assamese culture with extinction (Singh 1984, p.vii). The politicians of Assam were unable to compel the national government to promote and protect Assamese interests in Assam. This led to the emergence of many organizations like AASU which were dedicated to protect the interest and status of the Assamese in Assam. 'As the future of the Assamese people seemed dark due to increasing immigration, the AASU undertook an anti-foreigners movement better known as 'Assam Movement' during 1979-85 to pressure the center to detect and deport the foreign nationals' (Dutta 2015, p.31). By 1979, the AAGSP was formed as an umbrella organization and coordination committee for pursuing the AASU's agitation (Murty 1983, p.12). Both of the organizations developed a non-violent program of protests and demonstration to compel the government to identify and expel illegal immigrants. But the Nellie Massacre was a case of extreme violence during the Assam movement. The agitation program ended in August 1985 following the Assam Accord, which was signed by leaders of AASU-AAGSP and the Government of India. However this anti-government campaign that continued from 1979 to 1985 is also known as *Asom Andolan*.

During the movement, Hiren Gohain, a leading thinker of Assam, took the position that the Assam Movement was able to raise the people of Assam with national sentiments. The leadership of the Assam movement was also the national leadership. But he asserted that the leadership was gradually being moved to the hands of the AASU and its advisers. Those advisers apparently had good relations with many Indian organizations and the Indian Central Government. They also maintained a comfortable relationship with some of the rich business families of Assam. Therefore it can be seen that the entire Assam movement was directed by the personal political and economic interest of these people. At the same time Gohain did not say that their nationalist thought was artificial. The common masses of Assam wanted to protect their way of livelihood which was endangered by the illegal immigrants. They also wanted to protect their land which was gradually being occupied by the immigrants.

But the leftists of Assam tried to statistically prove that it was a myth that most of the land of Assam was occupied by the immigrants. It was occupied by the landlords. It was expected that there should be demands by the leadership of Assam movement to the government of India for facilitating mass production of crops on limited land. The leadership were also expected to give a new direction to education and training to extend opportunities to the unemployed youths. This ensured that the leaders of Assam movement had to promise that one part of the income of the state would be used for the common masses, but there was no evidence of the realization of these kinds of promises (2014, p.455-456).

These kinds of activities might have created a feeling of hatred among the leaders of the Assam agitation toward the communists. The members of the Leftist parties were ill-treated and considered as enemies by the participants of the movements. 'The left parties were first isolated by a clever manoeuvre, and then made the target of vicious propaganda' (Gohain 1980, p.419). They were carefully marked out and either killed, injured or kept on the run.

In spite of this kind of attitude of the leaders of Assam movement, the use of Bishnuprasad Rabha as an icon of Assamese nationalism peaked from the time of the Assam movement. The leaders of the Assam movement associated their ideology with the ideology of Bishnuprasad Rabha; however, they steered clear from Bishnu Rabha's political ideology. They focused on his characteristics as a belligerent nationalist artist, a literary person and *Kalaguru*, preferring to ignore that he had been a communist revolutionist since the time of his formal participation in the communist party in 1945 until his death. The leaders of the Assam movement were quite aware of the esteemed position of Bishnuprasad Rabha among the common masses. Many songs and plays of Bishnuprasad Rabha embody nationalist thought e.g. the social play *Krishak* has highlighted the emerging nationalist consciousness among the youth of Assam. In this play Arun, a youth recites a poem in the meeting held to form an executive committee for the non-cooperation movement. Through the poem Arun motivates Assamese youths by calling them the powerful sons of the nation. Their life will become unfruitful if they do not stand by the nation in these difficult times. However, these representations in plays by Bishnuprasad Rabha are not belligerent nationalism. Nonetheless, the leaders of Assam movement appropriated this iconic figure in order to promote and fulfill their own agenda. This means that it was intentionally done by the movement leaders to facilitate mass mobilization by dropping the communist ideology of Bishnuprasad Rabha.

Today, the Asom Sahitya Sabha shows interest in observing 'Bishnu Rabha Divas' whereas during his life time, Bishnu Rabha was never invited to attend the summits of the Asom Sahitya Sabha. He was not invited to the summit held in Rangia, and for the Tezpur summit, one of the coordinators of the cultural function of the occasion requested one of the artists of Guwahati to lead the local artists of Tezpur. The artist suggested Bishnu Rabha's name in his place. Later he met Bishnu Rabha who expressed that he was aware that they never invited him to such functions. He was only invited to the Mirza summit because of the demand of the farmers of that locality. But the leading figures of that meeting did not attend the talk by Bishnu Rabha on multiculturalism in Assam (Sarma 2007, p.18). It should also be noted that there was not a single instance of a condolence meeting being organized by the Asom Sahitya Sabha or any other cultural groups on 20 June 1969 on the day of the death of Bishnuprasad Rabha. Therefore it is again strange how suddenly he became so important and relevant in Assam under the patronage of the leading nationalist groups.

Bishnuprasad Rabha's contribution to national life was utilized by the RCPI. The revolutionaries of Assam like Upen Sarma, Horidas Deka and Haren Kolita introduced him to Soumendra Nath Tagore of Kolkata. He inspired Bishnu Rabha to communist politics by providing him with different readings on Marxist philosophy, Fascism and Russian revolution. Thus Bishnuprasad Rabha was inspired and became associated with the RCPI students union, farmers union and so on of Assam as cultural secretary. Gradually he became an active member of the Revolutionary Communist Party. His entry to the communist party also shows his cultural competence. His cultural creations as a part of the communist activities also reflect communist ideology, the dream of real freedom of the public and his aspiration to establish equality in the Assamese society. No doubt, these cultural activities justify Bishnu Rabha as an artist with his lyrical, poetical, dramatic compositions and so on.

But these compositions were the tools to spread revolutionary and communist ideology in the minds of people. Therefore, behind the image of an artist, Bishnu Rabha was a revolutionary. The celebration of 'Bishnu Rabha Divas' where others were invited to sing and play his songs and perform his poems does not throw light on any aspect of his ideology. As a result, the image of Bishnu Rabha as a revolutionary is yet to gain popular currency among the new generation.

Many emerging groups are very enthusiastic to establish an association between their ideology and that of Bishnuprasad Rabha so that they can convince the common masses about the relevance and justification of their demands. They often like to raise the contribution of Bishnu Rabha, but their ulterior motive is only to secure and validate their demands. The independence of Assam is often questioned by different socio-political activists. This question is also discussed in Facebook. India got independence on 15 August, 1947. But the question of independence for Assam has continued to be raised because inequality remains in the political and social field. Many political actors believe that the independence of Assam (of India and Assam) is just a new form of domination. Many youths associated with Satra Mukti Sangram Samiti (SMSS), one of the voluntary federations of the students and a wing of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) like to state that the independence of India from the British does not mean independence for Assam. For them, the celebration of 70<sup>th</sup> Independence Day in 2016 encouraged by the newly formed Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is only the celebration of that party's achievement in acquisition of power. These youths like to relate it to 'the rule of the black' which is more dangerous than 'the rule of the white'. Therefore, they believe that only the end of the rule of both the contemporary ruling party and the bourgeois can bring independence to Assam. This sounds like the notion of Bishnuprasad Rabha regarding independence, because being an active member of RCPI Bishnuprasad Rabha announced the independence of India as 'false independence' at Digheli Gaon on 15 August, 1947.

These young people make a link with the ideology of Bishnuprasad Rabha which was inspired by Marxist ideology. His consciousness was enriched by the combination of theoretical knowledge and his practical experiences among the tribal and non-tribal working class people (basically the farmers). As noted above, he considered the oppressed, depressed and exploited working class people the pioneers and conservators of culture. From 1945 onwards Bishnuprasad Rabha participated in various public gatherings in order to make working class people aware of this. The present emerging group of young people discusses these contributions of Bishnuprasad Rabha as being relevant to attain the consent of the public against the present political system. They claim that the image of Bishnuprasad Rabha only as 'devotee of art' is very carefully constructed by the hegemonic class to cover his revolutionary stance on behalf of the proletariats.

The same group of young people from the SMSS disapproves of the image of Bishnuprasad Rabha as a 'belligerent nationalist'. No doubt he became nationalist to stand against the exploitation of the country over Assam. But they understand him as a 'belligerent revolutionist'. For them he was not a so-called nationalist.

Further, some interpretations justify Bishnuprasad Rabha as 'tribal' with the stereotypical impression: tribal people do not maintain ambivalence about some pleasures; they are said to take direct satisfaction in such areas as food, drink, sex, dance and song; they prefer to live an unsettled life. They are stereotypically characterized by these notions and said to be 'uncivilized' or 'backward' people. Bishnu Rabha was engaged in different fields and achieved success in each and every effort. But he could not maintain his involvement in all the activities until his death. For his inconsistency of dedication many critics and writers try to examine him through this stereotypical vision of being 'tribal'. Sachi Sarma, one of the writers of Assam says that Bishnu Rabha was supporter of open sexual relationships based on Rabha's lecture in the Tangla Bodo Sahitya Sabha on November in 1955. Here, he identified himself as a child of the Rabha family (Rabha is an ethnic community of Assam) for which he needs wine and the company of girls (2007, p.16).

However, projection of the image of Bishnuprasad Rabha as 'tribal' is at odds with the image of an enlightened leader of the masses. In reality being a leader of the masses he came to his understanding of revolution with the help of common masses. However, Bishnu Rabha did trace back the roots of Assamese society to tribal origins. One catches a glimpse of Bishnu Rabha, the anthropologist in his poem 'Tribal, Jag Tribal'. Through this poem he wanted to make tribal people aware about their strength to come out from the stereotype of backwardness. If the prophetic vision of Rabha could be appreciated by the Assamese middle class, the state of Assam would not have witnessed the horrible spate of internecine fights and violent clashes in recent times (Bhattacharya 2007, p.12-13).

### **Images of Bishnuprasad Rabha: process of meaning making**

Images are means of conveying meaning. Different images are used in different contexts to convey the preferred meanings. These are iconic images containing a strong narrative meaning. Mike Parker stated, 'What is meant by this is that the strong narrative meaning contained in primary iconic images is sufficient, not only to prove perceptually appealing to the originating receptive communities, but also proving potently significant to future generations' (2012, p.24). In the case of images (either photographs or statues) of Bishnuprasad Rabha the effort is often seen to establish him as artist among the new generations. Most of images have the tendency to portray him as a dancer. Many reasons could have been associated with such images. The common notion is there that the title of *Kalaguru* was given to him in Varanasi based on his excellence in dance performance. His proficiency in dance and song is mostly highlighted in the intellectual and cultural arena. His performance of the *Tandava* dance in Kolkata is repeatedly highlighted by many critics including Anjula Bhuyan Borah, Soilen Bharali and Jagadindra Raychoudhury (Borah 2016; Bharali 2016 and Raychoudhury 2016). The more familiar people became with these cultural aspects, the more the images of him as an artist, mostly as a dancer, were copied. Therefore, the meaning of this iconic form implies a relationship Bishnuprasad Rabha/*Kalaguru* as is found in Guevara/Rebel; Monroe/Sex; Beatles/Love and Gandhi/Truth.

In the first part of his life Bishnu Rabha was a freedom fighter who stood against the British with the belief in Gandhian philosophy and later he became a Marxist-Leninist and

revolutionary. However, images conveying these ideologies are rarely seen contemporary times. The formal tribute to Bishnuprasad Rabha by Sarbananda Sonowal, the honorable chief minister of Assam on the Memorial Day (the anniversary of his death) of 2016 is again confined to the popular image of Bishnuprasad Rabha as *Kalaguru*. This homage, published in newspapers such as the *Dainik Janambhumi* and the *Amar Asom*, shows the iconic image of Bishnuprasad Rabha with a few lines of the song ‘Surare Deulare Rupare Sikoli Vangi Dili Khuli Duwar Sonowali Pujari o Sundar Pujari’. Again, this distances people from the ideology of Bishnuprasad Rabha as a communist. Many hotels and shops like to hang or showcase a photograph of Bishnuprasad Rabha. But the individuals working in those hotels or shops are not aware of the contributions of Bishnuprasad Rabha to Assam, even though somehow they are all aware that he was a revered figure in the national life of Assam. It seems that if they do not display the photographs of Bishnuprasad Rabha, it will imply their ignorance of the national life of Assam, because he has already been appropriated as a ‘cultural icon’ of Assam by different discourses.

### Conclusion

Rabha has been an immensely popular personality in Assam. But the popularity attained during his life span has been changed since the time of his death, because the new discourses have given new meaning to him. From these new discourses, the idea of Bishnuprasad Rabha as a ‘cultural icon’ of Assam has become important in the national life of Assam.

Bishnuprasad Rabha, the cultural icon of Assam, have arisen from different context, so that the cultural icon contains many interpretations, including the meaning of *Kalaguru*, devotee of art, revolutionist, belligerent nationalist and belligerent revolutionist. The projection of him as a ‘tribal’ is a politicized image, which conflicts with the image of him as the leader of masses. Although all these interpretations co-exist, the iconicity of Bishnuprasad Rabha under the label ‘Bishnuprasad Rabha/*Kalaguru*’ is dominant in the national life fostered by the hegemonic groups of Assam.

On the other hand the iconicity of Bishnuprasad Rabha is also validated by the narratives based on personal experiences of individuals as well as collective memories. Here the effort is also to establish similarity between this cultural icon and many significant figures of our national life. It is seen that the popularity of Bishnuprasad Rabha was spread mainly by the common people. He was popular among the common people for his active participation among different communities in trying to understand their socio-economic and political condition with deep insight. This popularity has been used by nationalist groups like AASU and Asom Sahitya Sabha as a tool to promote their ideologies among the common people. They represent Bishnuprasad Rabha as their all-time favorite one to attain good will from the common folks of Assam. On the other hand, for another group of nationalists like SMSS and the leftists, Bishnuprasad Rabha becomes important for his communist ideology and therefore they are always critical of the iconicity of Bishnuprasad Rabha as *Kalaguru* considering it to be a construction of the hegemonic class. However the popular reception of such iconicity of Bishnuprasad Rabha strengthens the profound relationship of the political and non-political groups of Assam to the national life.

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